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Images of desire

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IMAGES OF DESIRE





# IMAGES OF DESIRE

BY

RICHARD ALDINGTON

. . . le peuple des hommes ne pense que des pensées  
déjà exhalées, ne sent que des sentiments déjà usés  
et des sensations fanées comme de vieux gants.

REMY DE GOURMONT.

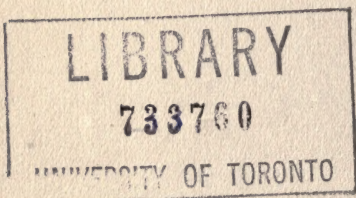
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## DEDICATION

***H**OW can I reach you? Though I hold you close  
the essential you escapes me; I cannot pierce to the  
core of your being.*

*Though I have given you all myself, what have I  
gained? Only my own happiness, not yours—so much  
more precious. Can I be glad seeing the life-weariness  
in your eyes?*

*What do you seek from me? Oblivion? Ask it of  
death, not of me. Happiness? I can only give you  
happiness if your love is great enough to create it.*

*To be loved is nothing; to receive is nothing. If you  
seek happiness, love and give.*



## PRELUDE

HOW could I love you more?  
I would give up  
Even that beauty I have loved too well  
That I might love you better.  
Alas, how poor the gifts that lovers give—  
I can but give you of my flesh and strength,  
I can but give you these few passing days  
And passionate words that since our speech began  
All lovers whisper in all women's ears.

I try to think of some one gift  
No lover yet in all the world has found ;  
I think : If the cold sombre gods  
Were hot with love as I am  
Could they not endow you with a star  
And fix bright youth for ever in your limbs?  
Could they not give you all things that I lack?

You should have loved a god ; I am but dust.  
Yet no god loved as loves this poor frail dust.

## AN OLD SONG

I HAVE no lust or care  
To sing of Mary  
I praise the quaint sweet air  
Of a mortal lady.

She is not clothed in sad  
Raiment like Mary,  
But in cloth and silk that is glad  
And full seemly.

Her eyes are not tear-rimmed  
Like those of Mary ;  
Only with love are they dimmed  
When she kisses me.

By God, though she be God's mother,  
I care not for Mary,  
Only to serve this other  
That is so dear to me.

## EPIGRAMS

### I

**Y**OUR mouth is fragrant as an orange-grove  
In April, and your lips are hyacinths,  
Dark, dew-wet, folded, petalled hyacinths  
Which my tongue pierces like an amorous bee.

### II

Your body is whiter than the moon-white sea,  
More white than foam upon a rocky shore,  
Whiter than that white goddess born of foam.



## POSSESSION

I MUST possess you utterly  
And utterly must you possess me ;  
So even if that dreamer's tale  
Of heaven and hell be true  
There shall be two spirits rived together  
Either in whatever peace be heaven  
Or in the icy whirlwind that is hell  
For those who loved each other more than God—  
So that the other spirits shall cry out :  
“ Ah ! Look how the ancient love yet holds to them  
That these two ghosts are never driven apart  
But kiss with shadowy kisses and still take  
Joy from the mingling of their misty limbs ! ”

## AN INTERLUDE

THERE is a momentary pause in love  
When all the birth-pangs of desire are lulled . . .

I wait,  
And glide upon the crested surge of days  
Like some sea-god, with tangled, dripping beard  
And smooth hard skin, who glimpses from the sea  
An earth-girl naked by the long foam fringe,  
And, utterly forgetting all his life,  
Hurries toward her, glad with sudden love.

Even in that pause of speed I live ;  
And though the great wave curl in spikes of foam  
And crash me bleeding at her cool small feet  
All breathless with the waters' sudden swirl,  
I shall be glad of every stabbing wound  
If she will hold my tired limbs to hers  
And breathe wild love into my mouth and thrill  
Even the blood I shed with that desire  
Which throbs all through me at her lightest touch.

## ELLA

*"Ella è quanto di ben può far natura."*

I F I should pass my life  
Dead to the beauty of the world,  
Not knowing the glint of sunlight,  
Wind rustling among deep grasses,  
Heavy fall of blossom from spring trees,  
Fragrance of southern orange-groves,  
Splendour of bronze and lofty spread  
Of wide arras in dead kings' dwellings,  
Dead to the sound of music  
That tears the heart with infinite longing,  
Dead to Homer, dead to Dante, dead to Villon,  
Dead to all things lovely save her loveliness,  
To all beauty but her body's glory,  
To all music but her voice speaking,  
To all knowledge save of her—  
Oh, then, I should have all things amply,  
She containing in herself all virtue  
Of every fair thing worthy of loving.



## HER MOUTH

### I

**H**ER mouth is a crushed flower  
That unpetals marvellously  
Beneath my lips.

### II

The perfume of her flesh stays with me  
Dwells in my mouth and nostrils  
After she has gone,  
So that no flavour of wine or flower  
Can conquer it.

### III

The crimson that dyes her lips  
Dyed mine, so close were our kisses ;  
All day I felt its soft caress  
Making smooth my lips.

### IV

She has but to turn her head  
And lay her lips to mine  
For all my blood to throb tumultuously :  
She is so shudderingly beautiful.

## V

When I am bitter sad  
With the emptiness of harsh days  
The memory of her kissing mouth  
Burns me to gladness.

## PORTRAIT

### I

**Y**OUR body has the hot splendour of gold lands  
Laden with sunlight and sharp heat—  
Lovely and savage.

### II

Hair such as yours  
Folded the white brows of Lesbia ;  
Such subtle weary eyes  
Stabbed the young Roman to despair.

### III

You are of those whose cruel lips  
Cried in the flame-pierced darkness  
Curses and prayers to Hecate ;  
Whose mouths were swift and soft to kiss  
And, having kissed, were bitter in revenge.

### IV

Such little breasts as yours  
Felt the quick asp bite  
Where lords had pressed their lips.



V

For such as you  
Kings have laid down their diadems,  
And brave men have shed tears,  
And gentle men done secret murder.

VI

And you are indifferent to all this,  
Weary-eyed and too distraught to care  
Whether your hands are wet with tears or blood ;  
Your eyes strain through a mist of lust  
For one face clear with love,  
Your lips parch for one kiss of tenderness.

## DAYBREAK

THE naked pale limbs of the dawn lie sheathed  
in dove-white folds of lawn  
But from one scarlet breast I see the cloudy cover  
slowly drawn.

Not all the blood of all our dead, the bright, gay  
blood so gaily shed,  
Shines with so clear a glow as gleams your breast-  
flower from our candid bed.

Ah, bend above me, dear, and take my life breath  
with your lips and break  
My body up as wheaten bread, and use my very  
blood to slake

Your parching sudden thirst of lust. Be cruel, love,  
be fierce and thrust  
Your white teeth in my flesh and taste how honey-  
sweet is amorous dust.

Ah! slay me with your lips, ah! kill my body's  
strength and spirit's will  
So that at dawn I need not go but lie between your  
breast-flowers still.

## SLEEP

IF but to sleep alone be fair  
As poets say,  
How piercing sweet to lie all night  
Until the day  
With all her flower-like body pressed  
Close unto mine,  
To feel her moving heart, to taste  
Her breath like wine. . . .

Ah, it were good to cease and die  
So sweet a way,  
Never to waken from our bed  
To the chill day,  
But sleep for ever in a dream,  
Head beside head,  
Warm in a golden swoon of love—  
Divinely dead.

## RESERVE

**T**HOUGH you desire me I will still feign sleep  
And check my eyes from opening to the day,  
For as I lie, thrilled by your gold-dark flesh,  
I think of how the dead, my dead, once lay.



## IMAGES OF DESIRE

### I

I DO not even scorn your lovers—  
They clasped an image of you, a cloud,  
Not the whole life of you that's mine.

### II

I do not even pity my mistresses—  
Such a poor shadow of desire  
Their half-warm passion drew from me.

### III

You are a delicate Arab mare .  
For whom there is but one rider ;  
I am a sea that takes joyfully  
Only one straight ship upon my breast.

### IV

Like a dark princess whose beauty  
Many have sung, you wear me,  
The one jewel that is warmed by your breast.

### V

As a soldier weary of fighting  
Turns for peace to some golden city,  
So do I turn to you, beloved.

## VI

The scarlet that stains your lips and breast-points—  
Let it be my blood that dyes them,  
My very blood so gladly yielded.

## VII

Let it be your flesh and only your flesh  
That fashions for me a child  
Whose beauty shall be only less than yours.

## VIII

Everlasting as the sea round the islands  
I cry at your door for love ;  
Everlasting as the unchangeable sea  
I cry the infinite for space to love you.

## IX

Earth of the earth, body of the earth,  
Flesh of our mother, life of all things,  
A flower, a bird, a rock, a tree,  
Thus I love you, sister and lover,  
Would that we had one mother indeed  
That we might be bound closer by shame.

## BEFORE PARTING

LOVE, though the whole earth rock  
With the shattering roar of the guns' booming,  
Though in that horror of din and flame and murder  
All men's blood grows faint and their limbs as water,  
Though I return once more to the battle,  
Though perhaps I be lost to you for ever—  
Give me, O love, your love for this last brief season,  
Be mine indeed as I am yours.

To-night there shall be no tears, no wearing sorrow,  
No drawn-out agony of hope, no cold despairing,  
Only we two together in a sudden glory  
Of infinite delight and sharp sweet yearning,  
Shutting out for a space the world's harsh horror.

Kiss my lips with your mouth that is wet with wine,  
Wine that is only less keen than your lips are ;  
Slip from under your fragile garments as a white rose  
Slips from under her leaves to the naked sunlight ;  
Give to my eyes your straight young body,  
The limbs that embrace me, the breasts that caress  
me,

Whisper to me the sudden words of yearning,  
The broken words that speak an infinite yearning  
That delight would last for ever, love never be  
ended. . . .

Give me this and I care not if death come after,  
For to-night there shall be no tears, no wearing  
sorrow,  
Only our kisses and whispers and stabbing heart-  
beats.



## PRAYER

**L**ORD and father of life,  
Of death and of bitter weeping,  
One or many, pitiful or cruel,  
Hear me, my prayer beating  
Like rain importunately, without intermission,  
For life, for a little life.

You know not her or love  
If you let death take me.

I do not ask you for her—  
No god can take her from me,  
Take her kisses and lithe body.  
Give me life, a few years  
To pour out for her,  
Until she tires of me  
Or age loosens my sinews  
And I be no more delightful to her.

Her body is honey and wheat,  
The taste of her mouth delicate ;  
Her eyes overcome me with desire,  
Her lips are a woman's.  
Under her feet I spread my days  
For her walking,  
She touches me with her hands  
And I am faint with beauty.

Therefore I am not willing to die  
Since she needs me.  
For her sake I would betray my comrades.

Yet if you are so avid of blood  
That even she cannot move you—  
Poor god without a lover—  
Kill us together, mouth to mouth and happy.

## LOSS

THIS is not hell—

At least merely a comfortable hell  
With warmth and food and some still moments  
Ere the true hell comes rushing in again,  
Yet this one thought is torture :

Have I lost her, lost her indeed?  
Lost the calm eyes and eager lips of love,  
The two-fold amorous breasts and braided hair,  
The white slim body my senses fed upon  
And all the secret shadows shot with fire?

## A SOLDIER'S SONG

**H**OW sadly for how many nights  
My dear will lie alone,  
Or lie in other arms than mine  
While I lie like a stone.

If she remembers me and weeps  
For her lost happiness,  
Though dead, I shall be pierced at heart  
For her great loneliness.

If she forgets me, if she gives  
Her lips and limbs to new desire,  
Though dead, I shall be pierced at heart,  
Burned stark by a sharp fire.

I would not have her pine and weep,  
I would not have her love again—  
Whatever comes after I die  
There will be only pain and pain.

I dare not ask for life, I dare  
Only to ask for utter death  
So that I may not know she breathes  
Life from another's amorous breath.



## ABSENCE

**D**AY after day fades from me,  
Each one cold and wan  
Because you are not near me.

Night after night drifts past,  
Cheerless, indifferent,  
Because you are not with me,  
Because I have not your lips to burn me  
Awake to a great delight,  
Because your eyes are not looking into mine  
With the keen entreaty of desire,  
Because each night I lie alone.

I am fierce, indignant, humiliated—  
To be chained away from you  
When I desire you above all things.  
Half I possess you, half hold you, half keep you—  
But would all of you satisfy my desire?

I am insatiate, desperate—  
Death, if need be, or you near me,  
Loving me, beautifully piercing me to life,  
But not this, not this bitterness, this grief,  
This long desert of absence.



## GAIN

LET not the jesting bitter gods  
Who sit so goldenly aloof from us  
Mock us too deeply,  
Let them not boast they hold alone  
The reins of pleasure, the delight of lust—  
We also, we that are but air and dust,  
Moistening that dust a little with old wine  
And kindling that air with fire of love  
Have burned an hour or two with blossoming pangs,  
And, leaning on soft breasts made keen with love  
And murmuring fierce words of rending bliss,  
Have gathered turn by turn unto our lips  
The twin wild roses of delight,  
The quick flower-flames that sear into the soul  
Sharp wounds of pleasure and extreme desire.

## CYNTHIA

DAY droops on stems of pallid light  
Over these sodden northern fields,  
And I am lonely, thinking here,  
Cynthia, of you.

Here life is but a phantom of himself  
And limps and mutters by these war-worn paths,  
And I could weep to waste my youth,  
Cynthia, from you.

O rose that filled my mouth with life!  
Wine of your lips, your budded breasts!  
How could I serve another god,  
Cynthia, but you?

## THE WINTER PARK

**I**T is dreary  
Out in the park of the château ;  
The paths are deep in mud,  
The trees damp and *triste* ;  
The marble stairs by the lake-side  
Are stained with mould,  
Untidy with twigs and dead grass ;  
There are no swans left  
To stud the blue water  
With their languid silver ;  
Oh, it is desolate and mournful and lifeless  
Under the soundless trees  
By the waveless water,  
But a frame for my gay dreams  
Of your head bent back  
With lips unfolded for my mouth to kiss !



## MEDITATION

OUTSIDE the young frost crisps the grass  
And bends the narrow willow boughs  
And flecks the dyke with little spears of ice ;  
The huge moon, yellow and blotched,  
Like the face of a six days' corpse,  
Stares hideously over the barren wood.

In the silence, the deep pool-like silence,  
Untroubled by crash of guns or tramp of men,  
I sit alone in a small Belgian house  
And stare against the moon and feel  
Silence like a slow wave of the outer sea  
Drive over and through me,  
Purging out bitterness, effacing miseries.

I have what I yearned for—  
The chance to live my life out to the end.  
And it is a great joy to sit here quietly and think  
That soon I shall return to her and say :  
" Now it is a free man that kisses you."

There will be strange meetings in cities for me,  
The hush of summer in English gardens,  
The glitter of spring in Italy,  
The old cafés in Paris.

And I shall have books again,  
Long quiet evenings by the tranquil lamp,  
Or wild gaiety with "my own sort"—  
And always there will be her love,  
Her eyes holding me dumb,  
Her mouth drawing the blood to my lips.

And yet and yet  
I am still not free from bitterness,  
For as I sit here thinking so tenderly of her,  
Maybe, over there across the Channel,  
Her eyes smile at another man  
As they smiled at me,  
And her red mouth stabs him to passion  
As it stabbed me.  
Is any woman both beautiful and loyal?

I think also that I am too restless  
For the old life,  
Too contemptuous of narrow shoulders  
To sit again with the café-chatterers,  
Too sick at heart with overmuch slaughter  
To dream quietly over books,  
Too impatient of lies to cajole  
Even my scanty pittance from the money-vultures.

Perhaps, then, this is my happiest moment,  
Here in this cold little Belgian house,  
Remembering harsh years past,  
Plotting gold years to come,  
Trusting so blithely in a woman's faith;  
In the quiet night,  
In the silence.

## ODELETTE

NOW I regret  
The fervour that has gone from me,  
Stolen by circumstance,  
Leaving me lassitude—  
A deserted temple with no god.

Could I not blind you  
With sudden enchantment,  
Making life a phantasm of delight?

Sharp clusters of flowers—  
Light irradiates the city ;  
O distant perfume  
Of lands intangible  
That vanish ere we reach them !  
O sudden shouting  
Of the great rowers, straining  
Bronze backs through the wave-track !  
Clamour about us,  
The interminable traffic  
Of a mistress city !

I come from darkness  
And ways of dolour  
To the brilliance of my city ;

I am glad of her ways,  
Her harshness, her beauty,  
Her wise old brooding,  
Her mysterious person.

And you are unhappy,  
And I cannot gladden you—

Misery of lovers.

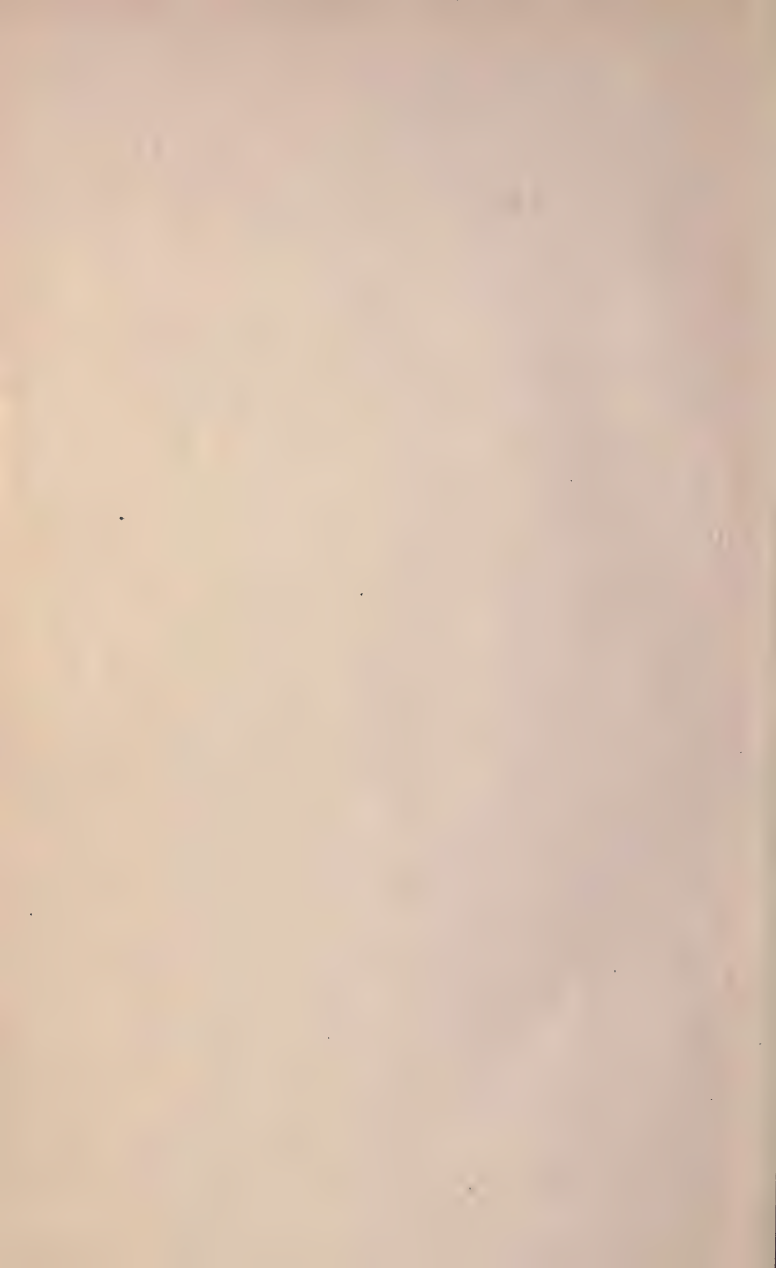


## EPILOGUE

HAVE I spoken too much or not enough of  
love?  
Who can tell?

But we who do not drug ourselves with lies  
Know, with how deep a pathos, that we have  
Only the warmth and beauty of this life  
Before the blankness of the unending gloom.  
Here for a little while we see the sun  
And smell the grape-vines on the terraced hills,  
And sing and weep, fight, starve and feast, and love  
Lips and soft breasts too sweet for innocence.  
And in this little glow of mortal life—  
Faint as one candle in a large cold room—  
We know the clearest light is shed by love,  
That when we kiss with life-blood in our lips,  
Then we are nearest to the dreamed-of gods.

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